



Tips for Developing a Partnership with School Staff

School food programs face unique challenges.

A school operates quite differently from the restaurant/kitchen environment. To be successful, chefs need to mentally transition from a restaurant or other well-stocked kitchen to an institutional environment. Chefs must also be aware that school food programs often face severe budgetary constraints, limited facilities, older equipment, and other challenges. Finally, it's critical to remember that ServSafe/Sanitation Guidelines are taken very seriously in school environments.

Working in schools takes time and commitment.

Because of the differences between schools and restaurants or other kitchens, chefs need to realize how much time is required to learn the ins and outs of his/her new environment. Chefs should allow sufficient time to forge relationships, assess schools' needs, and plan small ways to begin the partnership. A chef should evaluate their ability to take on the commitment with a school. The reward is a deeper trust among school stakeholders, which will ultimately lead to sustained change.

Schools must be approached with respect.

Chefs must know that each school works uniquely, with different viewpoints on how to improve their food environments. Some recognize that need, but may feel overwhelmed with their existing responsibilities. These staff members will likely welcome a chef, but others may feel resentful or defensive at a time when school food is routinely criticized in the media.

Because of sensitivities that may exist, it's essential that a chef enter a school the way he or she would enter a person's home. It's imperative that the chef be sensitive to everyone's views and works to make everyone feel proud to be a part of the process. While a chef may be filled with a desire to revamp the entire school food process immediately, he/she must realize that nothing will happen without adequate support in the school! All activities should be planned in full partnership with the schools. The chef should start small, and look for ways to alleviate the burdens of schools.

Get to know the school food operations. Discuss the possibility of joining foodservice staff in the kitchen and observing a meal in progress, both in the kitchen and in the cafeteria alongside the children. Foodservice personnel will recognize these efforts and will be crucial to move the relationship forward.

A champion can help build support.

A chef will need at least one champion to learn the nuances of the school and act as a liaison between the chef and the school. Ideas include:

If the chef is a parent of a student in the school, try approaching the child's teacher to learn about any opportunities or to build support.

Reach out to fellow parents, through the PTA or other parents groups.

Schedule a time to meet with key personnel who may become champions for the chef's efforts.

As a final tip, chefs may consider working in the classroom first to discuss food with children, as well as with teachers and parents. By starting in the classroom, chefs appear less intrusive and put less pressure on the school nutrition staff. After the classroom education, then "Let's Move" onto the cafeteria!